

II

A FAITH FOR THE TIMES¹

"Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth."
—2 Peter 1:12.

A MEMBER of King Arthur's court rode across the downs in the early morning to Camelot, and saw the city lifting itself roof above roof and battlement above battlement along the side of the great hill. But the crowning glory of the fair rich city was the palace of Arthur, builded by the magic of Merlin in days gone by. Surmounting it there was a dome around which ran four bands of mystic sculpture. On the lowest, beasts were slaying men; on the second, men were slaying beasts; on the third were warriors, perfect men; and on the fourth were men with growing wings. In that symbol the poet has described the progressive realization of the ideals of religion through the ages. From lower to higher forms of expression our holy faith moves on to ever fuller disclosures of the purposes of God.

Christianity is not a static religion. It is not a deposit from the past. It is no mere heaven-descended gift. It is the progressive realization of the higher human ideals, touched by the fire of the divine presence. And no feature of the New Testament is more impressive than the haunting expectation of better things ahead. It is not a finished but

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a growing faith which is the inspiration of the church of God. Such is the thought of the writer of this Second Epistle of Peter. He insists that it is a satisfaction to him to call often to their attention the common and accepted truths of the Christian doctrine, although he is aware that they understand the broad lines of the Master's instruction, and are interested students of the emerging phases of the new world-message. It is not so much a fixed and unchanging truth, as an enlarging, developing truth, which every day assumes new and more inspiring forms as it finds expression in the utterances and lives of the friends of Jesus.

It is this forward-looking attitude of the first interpreters of Christianity which forms the basis of confident expectation that new truth will evermore break out from the word of God, even as the Pastor of Leyden affirmed. The gospel is never the same in successive periods, but is an ever-fresh disclosure of the divine will as embodied in the life and teachings of our Lord. The great truths of religion do not change, but their forms are forever enlarging. One is not necessarily loyal to the message of the Bible because he preaches it as it was preached centuries ago. That very fact may make it the less intelligible to the men of this generation. Truth must be clothed in the garments of each new age. The false prophet is the man who repeats the message his fathers preached in the unchanged categories which were fitted to that earlier time. The true prophet is he who pays the price of a vital message, emphasizing the basic truths of the faith in the terms which the modern age can comprehend. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews warned his readers not to trust in human leaders nor in doctrines. Leaders pass away, and doctrines as well. The false doctrine passes away because it has not the vitality to

endure; the true, because at best it is but a partial and enlarging truth. It is Jesus Christ alone who abides the same from age to age.

The church is the custodian and interpreter of the message of Jesus. It is the most venerable and impressive of institutions. It is not perfect. It has the weaknesses of human nature, because it is made up of men and women of the common, human sort. It is broken into denominational fragments, which limit its efficiency and misinterpret its spiritual unity. It trusts too much to outward things,—possessions, institutions, movements, statistics, surveys, and spasms of evangelistic zeal. Yet in spite of these things it has been for twenty centuries the leader of humanity toward the ideals of civilization, democracy, education, social redemption, and the holy life. It possesses the one voice that speaks unhesitatingly in behalf of the reality of God, the program of Jesus, the victory of righteousness, and the winning of character.

What is the truth that the church ought to be proclaiming at the present time? What is a faith for the times? Never was the world more eager to hear a clear and convincing word on these cardinal themes. Never was there more tenseness of anxiety as to what sort of a message may be trusted. There are many claimants for popular attention. There are many remedies offered for the evils of the day in dogmas, political, social, religious. Can the church offer a satisfactory answer to the insistent inquiry of the age for truth? What shall it preach as a faith that is fitted to the times?

First, a faith suitable to this and every other period must be biblical. The Bible is the greatest of the sacred books of the race. Every religion has its scriptures. But judged by every criterion of efficiency the Scriptures of the Old and

New Testaments are the supreme documents of the holy life. There are many bibles, but only one Bible. The greatness of this collection of writings does not lie in any qualities of inerrancy, or verbal inspiration, or historical and scientific exactness of statement. The Bible makes no such claims for itself. And when they are made in its behalf, there is imposed upon it a burden of meticulous precision and supernaturalism which it refuses to bear. On much higher levels of insight and spiritual urgency lie the proofs of the real inspiration and authority of the Bible. It is the classic record of the supreme religious experiences of the race. It is the description of the lives and activities of those forceful personalities who have given to humanity its most urgent impulses to the attainment of moral passion and spiritual leadership. Such men were the prophets of Israel on the one side, and Jesus Christ and the men He gathered about Him on the other. There are many phrasings of the doctrine of inspiration, which is nowhere defined in the Scriptures. But the supreme test of the unique character of the Bible, by whatever term that uniqueness may be described, is its ability, when permitted to have its rightful effect upon human life, to transform individuals and communities into the new and worthful terms which Jesus made the norms of the Kingdom of God. A greater proof of holy character and efficiency could not be proposed for any document than this. Within the wide circle of this body of writings will be found the ideals of all ethical and religious instruction. Out of the Old Testament Judaism took its most impressive formulations of truth. From the Scriptures of Hebrew and Christian origin Mohammedanism derived its highest conceptions of social obligation and religious duty. The contact of the Bible with the sacred writings of other faiths results in the slow but certain per-

vasion of the non-Christian world with the ideals of Jesus Christ. The Word of God is the rail along which all history has run in the direction of a fuller realization of the Kingdom of God. The Bible is not a fetish to be worshipped, as the Sikh adores his holy book, the Granth. It is rather the record of spiritual struggles in the history of a very notable portion of the race, and during some of the most eventful periods of human experience. It portrays the activities of the moral leaders of ancient Israel. It presents the picture of Jesus Christ, conceded by all who have made a study of religion to be the world's unique and authoritative spiritual teacher. It describes the impression made by His life and teachings upon His generation, and makes clear the ideals of His first friends and interpreters. It describes the beginnings of that marvelous movement which became known as the Christian society, the church of Christ, and its gradual expansion in the first century throughout the Graeco-Roman world. In a very definite manner the fortunes of the church have been interlaced with those of this Book. Wherever the Bible has gone, Christianity has made itself felt. Wherever the gospel has been preached, the Bible has been accepted as an authoritative source book, and a trustworthy guide in the achievement of the ends desired by the Founder of the faith. Within the spaces of that book, rightly interpreted, are found the facts and directions on which the Christian enterprise is based. Outside of its teaching and influence no adequate ethical and spiritual leadership can be found for this or any other generation.

A faith for the times must likewise be scientific. It must be able to meet the challenge issued by the body of knowledge of which the modern world has come into possession. The writers of the Bible and the great religious teachers of whom it speaks were the children of the centuries in which

they lived. Their knowledge of history, science, and the customary order of the world was the common knowledge of intelligent men in their times. They had no supernatural dower of information on these themes. But in one great domain they were specialists. Regarding the moral life and the divine purposes of history they spoke with an authority and constructiveness found in no other writings of the past. Their ordinary learning on all the common themes of life they employed with unfailing effectiveness in the enforcement of ethical and religious truth. That was their one concern and passion. The generations have greatly widened the field of human knowledge regarding the physical universe, the values of the records of the past, the nature of the human mind, and the progress of the social order. The results of modern studies in evolution, ancient history, the nature and values of biblical literature, the development of educational method and experience, and the progress of the social order of the world under the guidance of advancing ideals, have set the Bible and Christianity in a new and vivid light, and made clear the relations of morals and religion to all the past's incalculable hoard of treasured knowledge and institutional inheritance. The world is very young as yet, and science has taken but a few steps in its long career. But enough of new truth has emerged to make obsolete many of the dogmas and externals that were esteemed essential to Christianity in ages when speculation and system building had the right of way.

An intelligent, scientific faith seeks for the realities rather than the superficials of religion. It leaves behind many doctrines and interests that were once esteemed vital but are now seen in their non-essential light. The cancelations of development are no less impressive in the area of religion than elsewhere. The pathway of the years is strewn with

rejected traditions. The necessity of believing in such items as the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible; the validity of the entire body of miraculous narratives contained in the Bible, including the virgin birth of Jesus and his physical resurrection; the predictive element in prophecy, as related to minute events in the life of our Lord; such doctrines as election, the divine decrees, the trinity, the substitutionary theory of the blood atonement, angelic and saintly mediation, baptismal regeneration, close communion, immersion baptism, and the immediate arrival of the second advent is no longer enlisting the assent or the approval of thoughtful students of the Bible and the Christian faith. Whether such items are unbiblical and contrary to sound valuation of truth, or merely secondary and inconsequential among the facts of Christian history, they no longer engage the serious interest of modern seekers after reality, and must therefore take their place among the minor or discarded materials of theological insistence. There were ages when the church was very sure on all these points. But the twentieth century is wholly impatient with the confidence of the fourth. It has more important matters to consider than those that absorbed the attention of religious leaders in that more naïve and assertive age. The vast store of facts from every realm which demand attention to-day has robbed many earlier dogmas of their value, and left them by the wayside. This is all to the good in the search for a living and inspiring faith to-day. What Matthew Arnold called the "insane assurance of traditional theology" is passing away. Men of the times are no longer willing to follow a religious leadership which backs up under a half-understood text at the approach of an idea. A faith for the times must be willing to meet frankly and boldly all the facts of nature and history. And Christianity rightly interpreted is ready

to meet that challenge without apology or hesitance. It is a faith for an age of question; it is a gospel for a world of sin.

A faith for the times will be a liberal faith. By this is meant a generous, inclusive, rich, and inspiring faith. Some types of religious thinking are called liberal whose chief characteristic is their scantiness and poverty of conviction. There are people who in their effort to be free from tradition and dogma have cast away most of the essentials of Christianity, and holding only to a thin, pallid, and anæmic body of benevolent ideas, imagine themselves to be emancipated and liberal. Such a position cannot meet the test of the times. The men and women of this generation, students, business and professional people, working men and others who are seriously concerned about the basic facts of religion but have no time for trifling, demand a faith that has grip and conviction. They want a belief which has discarded the secondary elements of insistence upon dogma, ritual, ordinances, and organization, and is concerned with the basic facts of Christianity. They want no pseudo "fundamentals," but the real primaries of a rich and abiding belief. It is always pathetic to see men and women divesting themselves successively of their former convictions, and then calling themselves liberal. It is as if one should throw away his best possessions, and assume that thereby he had become opulent. Mere negation is not freedom; an airy dissent from established truth is not liberality.

A truly liberal faith will ground itself in a firm belief in the living God. It will not be as dogmatic in its affirmations regarding Him as some of the theologies have been. But it will accept as valid the great witnesses of history, the prophets, the saints of all the years, the apostles, and, most of all, our Lord himself. Whatever we may say of Him on

other grounds, Jesus knew more of the Father than any other who has passed this way. To Him God was the great reality. The problems regarding the nature of God which have vexed the mind of the modern world had for Him no baffling values. He was not disturbed over the question as to the divine personality, for less than personal He knew the Father could not be and sustain to Him the relationship which was the very breath of His life. It is that same Father that the modern Christian finds the great Reality and the divine Necessity. He is to all discerning spirits still and evermore the inspirer and answerer of prayer. He is the Great Companion in the daily stress of experience.

Whoso hath felt the spirit of the Highest,
Cannot confound, nor doubt Him, nor deny;
Aye with one voice, O world, though thou deniest,
Stand thou on that side, for on this am I.

A liberal faith will include a vital belief in the centrality and leadership of Jesus Christ. It is He who has made Christianity possible. He was one in spirit with the prophets and the great souls of earlier days, but He took the truths they had uttered and gave them new and exalted values in His message to the world. It is His definition of spiritual realities that constitutes the gospel. It is His attitude toward life that is normative for all who call themselves by His name. To be a Christian is to accept His leadership, and to take with seriousness His program for a growing and regenerated social order. His leadership is not that of a moral teacher, however great, who once lived and has left a body of directions to be observed. Rather is the supremacy of Jesus that of a living Lord, Who, having seen with piercing vision into the heart of the world's tragedy and opportunity, demanded for Himself the joy and

agony of participation in all its mystery and pain, and thus of winning through to victory with all who were willing to share with Him in the great adventure. The early church spent much time in the discussion of the nature of Christ. Many theories were devised and most of the creeds were framed to put the inscrutable facts of His majestic personality into confessional form. The modern world of Christian scholarship is less confident that it understands the marvel of His life. But it is far more concerned to apply the principles He uttered to the vexed problems of individual and social experience. Men may differ in their definitions of His nature, and be compelled to wait for fuller light on the intricacies of His thought. But of one thing they are becoming more fully assured with the passing of time, and that is that those who seek His friendship and attempt to inaugurate His program in the world order of our time come to easy understanding of each other, and happy companionship in the activities of the Kingdom of God. We may not be able to understand all the mysteries which surround the character of this Jesus of Nazareth, Who has become the Christ of history and experience. But we can join with loving reverence in Gilder's confession of faith:

If Jesus Christ is a man, and only a man, I say
That of all mankind I will cleave to Him,
And to Him will I cleave always.
If Jesus Christ is God, and the only God, I swear
I will follow Him through heaven and hell,
The earth and the sea and the air.

A liberal faith will include a belief in the church. It will not overlook the strangely human and wavering nature of the church through the centuries, its millenarian vagaries,

its fruitless and fanciful speculations, its bitter partisanships and hatreds, its sectarian divisions, its pride of possessions, institutions, and wealth, its trust in movements, drives, and spasms of evangelistic zeal. These are among the serious blemishes on the history of this organization. But no student of human records can ignore the fact that the church for twenty centuries has been the unfailing witness to the message of Jesus in the world, the leader in the struggle for civilization and education, the herald calling men from the life of sin and selfishness to goodness and virtue, and the beautiful pioneer in the vanguard of the world's progress toward a better social order and the realization of the ideals of our Lord. The church is not on dress parade, but is fully conscious of its own defects and delinquences. Its severest critics are not its enemies, but the unsatisfied souls within its own ranks. In spite of its limitations, it comes gradually to understand the deeper meanings of its divine mission to interpret its Leader to all mankind; and going forth in His spirit to take up His sublime tasks of teaching, preaching, and redeeming, it slowly but surely puts behind it the sectarianisms and the superficials which have marred its progress, and presses on to the completion of its glorious and far-reaching enterprise.

A liberal faith will include a belief in the holy life. Into the deep mystery of the atonement men are less confident they can peer understandingly than in former ages. None of the theories of that great reality is wholly satisfying. But the simple fact remains that because our Lord has come this way, and has lived and wrought His work of sympathy and power in our behalf, has gone down into the deeps of death as a witness to the love of His soul for humanity, and has made us understand that over such a life death has no dominion, it is easier for men of serious purpose to under-

stand the nature of God, to win out in the battle against selfishness and sin, and to feel the thrill and the passion of redemption. The multitudes who to-day are the living witnesses to this salvation wrought by the grace of God within them are dealing with facts as scientifically tested as are those of biology or physics. The holy life is as possible and as competently realized to-day as in the ages of the saints and the mystics. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," is as of old the confident affirmation of the friends of the Lord. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God," is the confession and the assurance of great numbers of consecrated men and women who are uplifting to God the white flowers of blameless and triumphant lives. And thus as in the days of His first ministries among men, Jesus Christ is both the Friend and Saviour of humanity.

And a liberal faith will include belief in eternal life. One of the confident assurances of Jesus to His followers was the fulfilment of life beyond the grave. Not much is said in the Christian sources beyond this confident promise. Many different opinions concerning the future life were expressed by the early Christians, but none of them partook of the completeness and finality of the Master's program for the present life. In fact, as Henry Drummond once remarked, "the program of the future life has not yet been issued." And even if it had been, there is no language that could interpret it to us. For the disclosures of that larger sphere of being we may well wait in patience. It is enough to know that "when the earthly house of our tabernacle is dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." These few and basic beliefs a liberal faith may well include. They do not exclude speculation, conjecture, or personal confidence upon

many other themes involved in Christian experience. But they are the essential things, the basic truths of the Christian faith. And a faith that calls itself liberal could hardly omit any of these fundamental elements.

A faith for the times will not only be biblical, scientific, and liberal, but it will be socially minded. There is no such thing as a merely individual Christianity. We do not live isolated lives. Salvation is the readjustment of individual lives to God, but it is not wrought in separation from others. The purpose of Jesus was to change the social order of His day that it might become increasingly the realization of the Kingdom of God. The business of Christianity is to discover the changes that Jesus would desire in the social, industrial, economic, educational, political, and religious life of the times, and get them accomplished. No religion is worthy of the name that concerns itself solely with individual evangelism. It is not the business of the church merely to save men off the wreck of human society, but rather to save the wreck itself. Christianity therefore interests itself in the welfare of little children, as Jesus did. It liberates womanhood from the limitations of the past. It turns the light upon the criminal systems of the world, and demands that courts be more expeditious and just, and that prisoners be accorded the rights due to human beings. It insists that the present industrial misunderstanding, whereby capital and labor are arrayed against each other, must cease, and pledges itself to such a study of the facts on both sides as shall disclose the causes and the remedies of the situation. It sets itself to the quickening of the political conscience, so that the great Christian ideals of government may come to fuller realization. It undertakes to root out the causes of racial prejudice which have set groups against each other in our American cities. It makes us

increasingly sensitive to our international obligations, so that no mere jingo nationalism or insular selfishness shall permit us to forget our responsibilities to all the nations of the world, and particularly the weaker ones. That these and other social interests are emerging to the vision of men and women who have the mind of Christ is one of the heartening signs of the times.

And finally, a faith for the times will be a unifying faith. The greatest hindrance to the effectiveness of Christian effort to-day is the sectarian spirit in the churches. Historically there was an adequate and proper reason for the separation of the denominations one from another at the Reformation. Then it was a choice between division and sterility. It was worth even so heavy a price to escape the deadness of the prevailing autocracy of Rome. But that age has passed away. The dead hand of ecclesiasticism is relaxed. The danger to-day is the loss of energy and efficiency through denominational separation and wastage. And therefore the churches are studying the art of co-operative action. In a score of ways, and chiefly through the wise leadership of the Federal Council of the Churches, they are discovering that without sacrifice of conviction or testimony, great areas of Christian interest, like evangelism, Christian education, social service, inter-racial adjustment, interdenominational comity, and allied missionary work can be cultivated in a fraternal and co-operative manner. The prayer of Jesus for the unity of His people is already finding partial answer. And if His words "that the world may believe," are to be taken at their full value, it is apparent that His program will never be taken seriously by the world at large till those who call themselves by His name are one in spirit and service.

Such are among the important phases of a faith for the

times. They are new and insistent features of that old and timeless faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. They are the emerging verities of the gospel in an age the most nervous and eager that the Christian centuries have known. To give clear and steadfast testimony to such truths is the work of the church and of those great educational foundations which Christianity has promoted, and which have become the pride of our commonwealths and our municipalities. The church and the university go hand in hand to the emancipation of the world from its bondage to ignorance and sin. In a very true sense, as Mr. Wells has affirmed, history is a race between education and chaos. And the two institutions allied in the inspiring effort to win out for humanity are the church of God and the university whose ideals are those of sound, liberal, and reverent learning.

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